

Book Reviews

On Music and Musicians of Hindoostan : Ashok D. Ranade; Promilla & Co., Delhi, 1984; 208 pages; Rs 250.

There is much in this book that is rather odd and irrelevant, but it is also distinguished by moments of perceptive writing and in so far as I am prompted by its closing essay to end this review in an admiring vein, I may begin by inviting attention to its flaws. The author, Dr Ranade, is competent, even brilliant, where he writes straight in the light of his own experience as a discriminating listener; but where he essays to theorize in respect of art (or music) taken generally, his thought often grows indistinct, and sometimes even discrepant. Consider, for instance, the following from page 73 of the book:

1. Can one describe the compulsions operating behind the early Indian film-music as aesthetic?
2. The author feels that the answer is in the affirmative.
3. [Because] In the phase discussed, the main aim and the effect was to reach and hold the audience which itself was new to the fare.
4. The attempt did not have a valuational bias.
5. This is the reason why so many of the examples of early film-music are musically so unexciting.

6. They had no aesthetics function to discharge vis-a-vis music.

7. *Their underlying compulsions were those of initial communication, which though fundamental, are not aesthetic.*

The words here cited are the author's own. Only the break-up (along with the numbering and the italics) is mine! I do it for the sake of understanding. Now, bearing in mind that the reference is all along to our *early film music*, let us look at the sentences listed.

Taken together, numbers 1 and 2 say that the compulsions behind early Indian film music *were aesthetic*. But number 7 flatly denies this; taken along with 5 it says that the "underlying compulsions" of "many... examples of early film — music..." *are not aesthetic*. How is the reader here expected to regard the compulsions in questions — as aesthetic or non-aesthetic? Unluckily, a closer look here only justifies my complaint that the writing is inconsistent. If we take 3 along with 1 and 2, the author would appear to say clearly that "the compulsions

operating behind the early Indian film-music" were *aesthetic* (1 and 2) "because the main aim and... effect" (of this music) was to reach... the audience. Here, 'reaching the audience' can only be taken to mean *communication* of musical meaning. If we interpret the 'reaching' thus, and we can hardly avoid so taking the word, the full argument would here be roughly as follows:

- a. The main aim and effect of early Indian film music was to "reach and hold the audience".
- b. Such 'reaching' (or *communication*) of musical meaning is an aesthetic compulsion.
- c. So the compulsions behind our early film music may be said to have been *aesthetic*.

But then, is not *a* quite opposed to number 7 which clearly says that the compulsions of (initial) communication are *not aesthetic*, though "fundamental" they may well be?

I am quite willing to accept the suggestion that communication is not the essence of art; but if the author (I repeat) says (in number 7) that the compulsions are *not aesthetic*, how can he affirm (in para 4, on p. 3) that "communications-revolutions threaten the validity of every consecrated art-theory" as distinguished from the presenta-

tion of, say, an art like music?

Such writing can hardly be expected to improve one's *understanding* of music as art. Unfortunately, where the author makes a pointed attempt to give some such light he often misses the mark. Take, for example, the way Cheeze is explained in the glossary (p. 202): "Any song-text in its entirety (in manifestations of art-music)". I am not sure what exactly the bracketed words here lend to the wholeness of the meaning; but I am positive that to interpret Cheeze merely as the complete *text* of, say, the Sthāyī-antarā of a Khayāl is at once to miss the two essential meanings of the word as used in our musical parlance: (a) that the song (with its text) is *properly composed*; and that (b) it is therefore a thing of *intrinsic beauty*. But whereas this instance may be slurred as a mere lapse, no one will fail to be hurt by the way the preceding word, Chaturang, is explained. The word *directly* means four Angas or sections, not four Rangas or colours as the author believes. From the view-point of practical music, however, what disturbs me most is the way our key rhythmic term, Sama, is here adverted to. The author interprets it as "the first beat of the taala-cycle in Hindustani music tradition". This is, I am pained to say, the view of those who are not really familiar with how the Sama is used or appears in

our music. Our rhythm not only arises from, but returns to the first beat, completing a cycle; the wheeling goes on and on; and what is merely the first beat in abstract grammar is in fact the focal beat of the cycle, and quite often a pattern's built-in destiny in living music. Even apart from the details of performance, how can our rhythm be said to be cyclic, which it is if the *Sama* is merely the first beat *and not also the point of return?*

To turn now to the defect of irrelevance, I think its most glaring instance occurs on pp. 40-41. Some of Sootras that the author regards as providing valuable insight into "the collective mind that moves Hindustani music" (p. 40) are to me out of place in the book. How does it help our understanding of music, I ask, to reflect on the following:

7. To be born with, to have an inclination and to have a nature
13. The real, the imitation and the fashionable
19. Fame is greater than Sanskrit
26. Firstly to eat, then to dress, and then, only then, to look after your home

Nor is the work under review free from printing errors. Here are some: 'asthamatic' (twice on p. 142; the second *a* is unwanted); 'reveal' (p. 94; should be 'reveals'); 'asthaayi' (p. 201. Here the first *a* is an outrage. What is called a *Sthayi* in our music is stable, in respect of its

location in the scale; *Asthaayi*, on the other hand, means unstable!) But, of course, the most eye-catching of these is 'Hindoostan' (as against 'Hindustan') on the very outer cover and jacket of the book. The printer's artifice of doing without diacritic marks makes many terms appear unduly elongated. But perhaps we could justify 'Patiaalaa gharaanaa' (p. 193) as a *taan!*

All this however relates to the mere manner of the book, that is, *how* it projects what it sets out to. Nothing has so far been said about *what* it dwells at length upon and what it skips. But here too, I fear, I see cause for complaint. Twenty-six pages are devoted to the 'Indian Oral Tradition & Hindustani Music', the author taking pains to explain commonplaces like "*wah wah*" (p. 47). On the other hand, only 65 of the work's total pages (108) are given to classical musicians. And these are all, be it noted, exponents of *Khayāl-gāyaki*. No regular *Dhrupada* exponent finds a place in the book; and, to turn to our instrumental music, such illustrious names as *Hafiz Ali Khan*, *Allauddin Khan* and *Ali Akbar Khan* (Sitar), *Ravi Shankar* and *Vilayat Khan* (Sitar), *Panna Lal Ghosh* (flute) and *Bismillah Khan* (Shahnai) are missing. *Ālāpa* gets a little more than four lines in the glossary; *Veenā* is visible neither here nor in the index; and one can only

wonder how the author yet expects the book to "project (not only) the immense variety (but) the extreme complexity of Hindustani art-music" (see the preface). I admit that an author has the right to write on the vocalists he has heard or is fond of, but where this choice is exercised, the title cannot be all-encompassing. A smaller and much less expensive volume confined to *six Indian vocalists* here ably dealt with, and perhaps also titled as such, would have been a much better form for this book.

This does not mean, however, that one can shut one's eyes to what distinguishes this work: its sensitive and sometimes beautiful analysis of the music of the masters chosen, buttressed with such observations of general theoretical value as arise out of actual listening. This one quality, I believe, is enough to endear the book to a Rasika-reader; and I cannot help listing the phrases which have fascinated me: "carving out contours of words in sound"; "the role ... [of] words ... [as] sound-oriented, not 'meaning-oriented'" (p. 145); "taans ... not ... [as a mere] reeling off of paltas ... [but what is aesthetically more desirable, as] 'significant consolidations of raga-images'" (p. 147); "the resulting fractional pauses created a chiaroscuro effect of sound and silence" (p. 144); "today the

tempo has been slowed down to such a [crawling] pace that it has caused a near-total obliteration of the design of individual taals" (p. 155); "raag-dynamics ... as the cumulative result of volume-variations and the condensation-rarefactions of the note-clusters" (p. 159). I must also quote the following passage:

Even the joint-consonants of the words were not glossed over. [The] Ustad could maintain his 'sing-at-ease' quality along with a firm shaping of the phonetic units in *taranas* due to his rare voice-qualities. Therefore, edges of the words were never lost or rounded off in his singing. They were carefully chiselled into their individual shapes—unblunted and yet without strain.

[p. 195]

Dr Ranade can indeed register the subtlest detail of our music. What is more, he can manage to defend our singers where they seem suspect. I say so in the light of two pages on Ustad Abdul Karim Khan (pp. 159-60). The way they proceed makes sense and is heart-warming, even noble.

S.K. SAXENA

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Kuttampalam & Kutiyattam: Govardhan Panchal; Sangeet Natak Akademi, Delhi, 1985; 160 pages; Rs 130.

Anyone making an in-depth probe into the theatre legacies

of our country is invariably struck by the fact that all our aesthetic endeavours have for their reference point Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*. True, Bharata has been remarkably comprehensive in his treatise, covering every possible aspect of the art of theatre, dealing in minutest detail with its entire range. Further commentaries were written elaborating Bharata's theories and offering various interpretations, including regional interpretations, one of the last works of kind being *Balarama-bharatam* by Balaram Varma of the late 18th century, which sought to analyze Bharata's theories and adapt them to the practising traditions of Kerala.

However, we have failed in evolving our own theories in the face of current practice using Bharata's work as a take-off point. In the process, our theatre forms have remained where the great sage left them. Starved of fresh infusions of thought on theatre, we have fallen prey to alien influences, totally divorced from our own cultural milieu. Our own culture, interacting with world cultures, struggled to retain its identity in order that we might speak as equals in the global cultural dialogue. But we have found ourselves wanting—our weapons were outdated, they could not meet the onslaught of evolving demands of the changing times. The result has been disastrous. Not only in the cities,

where the Western assault was direct and forceful, but even in the remotest villages, the basic approach to aesthetics has changed completely, to a degree that actually jeopardizes our cultural existence.

Now here is a book on Kerala's temple theatre, Kuttampalam, and the enactment of Sanskrit plays—Kutiyattam—in that theatre, written by Goverdhan Panchal, which reiterates the view that the essence of a regional tradition like Kutiyattam also "belongs to the classical tradition as seen in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, in at least its *Dakṣhināṭya Pravṛtti*". Shri Panchal elaborates on various aspects of Kutiyattam like the four *Abhinayas*—*Angika*, *Vachika*, *Satvika* and *Aharya*—comparing them with *Nāṭyaśāstra* traditions and laying emphasis on regional variations. He also examines in his introductory chapter the historical background of the region vis-à-vis the growth of the art of the Chakyars from the days of the *Silappatikaram*—the authoritative treatise on poetics written during the days of the Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas. The epigraphical and literary references also are dealt with in detail to show how the art form had drawn its life-force from different sources.

Panchal strongly argues that Kutiyattam is *Angikabhinaya*-based, in other words, it is the actor's art par excellence. This

view is basic to our concept of Indian theatre, where the actor's supreme autonomy cannot be questioned or compromised with. This in no way detracts from the importance of the other participants in theatre—essentially a collaborative effort. However, the actor's presence on stage being the vital link with the audience and the immediate vehicle of interaction cannot be questioned.

What, then, is the importance of the playwright? I would say that a playwright becomes important only when he internalizes the concept of the actor. But there are scholars who strongly hold a text-biased view, claiming that theatre emanates from the pen of the playwright. This opinion negates the basic foundations upon which Indian theatre has grown over the years and denies the importance of the actor in that evolutionary process.

Kutiyattam is a prime example of traditional Indian theatre and its values, demonstrating conclusively the actor's role in projecting the non-textual potential of a text, without which the text itself would exist merely as a literary vessel devoid of any theatrical content. A text may survive as a good piece of literature by virtue of its poetic content. The visual poetry embedded in it can achieve its *Arthakriya* (semiotic possibilities) only when subjected to the visual

interpretation of the actor, opening up numerous vistas of meaning.

In his detailed examination of the geographics involved in the staging of Kutiyattam in the Kuttampalam, Shri Panchal rightly focuses on the total integration between the poetic structure of the text and the physical structure of the theatre, which necessarily postulates an intimate relationship between the actor and the audience. The Kuttampalam—with its *Prekshagriha* (auditorium), *Rangashirsha* (rear stage), *Rangapeedha* (fore-stage), and *Nepathya* (off-stage)—is ideally designed for the actor to present *Satvikabhinaya* in all its power, and for the audience to grasp that power. The author has correctly compared the Kuttampalam with the *Natyamandapa* of Bharata, especially the middle-sized *Vikrishta* theatre recommended for the mortals. He is also right in likening the Kuttampalam to the *Sailaguhagara* or cave-like structure of Sanchi and Bharhut.

In his detailed examination of the temple theatre of Kerala and its link with the *Vikrishta Madhyama* or rectangular middle-size theatres, Shri Panchal takes two representative Kuttampalams of Kerala as examples—those of Kidangur and Trichur. But the photographs show the ceiling structures, inner pillars, stages, auditoria, carvings, entrances, trellis frames,

entrance balustrades, copper-plated roofs, etc. of more than a dozen important Kuttampalams. Together with these, the sketches of halls in temples which do not have Kuttampalams form a useful appendix for those who want to study the legacy of the ancient theatre in some detail. A photograph of the Athishtana or basement of a unique oval-shaped Kuttampalam (a type not even mentioned by Bharata) at Chengannur is also given. A fire in the remote past completely destroyed the superstructure of this Kuttampalam. An attempt to rebuild it on the surviving base in the late 19th century failed—the engineers did not know how a compatible ceiling could be supported on this base. However, a wooden model was constructed, now on display at Trivandrum Museum; a photograph of the model is also included in the book.

There is no ancient theatre structure surviving anywhere in India except the Kuttampalam which, although different in many respects from the theatres outlined in Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, nevertheless serves to explain the concepts of theatre design detailed therein.

Probably the only similar theatre-house of the past is the Namghar of Assam where Bhaona is staged even now. In the light of the unhindered survival of a form like Bhaona all over Assam, in relation to the

physical theatre that is its habitat, we can today understand many aspects of our practising traditions as preserved in the extant texts of Sanskrit plays. For example, the Sutrasthan in Bhaona is not merely one who introduces the play to the audience as in Sanskrit drama, but also a character present throughout the play to interpret its philosophic undercurrent. This might have been the concept of Sutrasthan in the folk tradition which ultimately found a place perhaps in early classical drama.

Shri Panchal rightly laments the callous neglect of Kuttampalams, and the ignorance regarding the relevance of these structures as proud remnants of a glorious tradition.

The art of a people relates to their intrinsic character. It can evolve and become relevant only when it has an organic relationship with the roots of their culture. This does not mean one must fix every endeavour to the reference point of the past, but that the artist should be able to evolve new forms from older living traditions, even where such evolution is tangential to mainstream effort and belief. There is no need to construct kuttampalams to enact contemporary plays: what is needed is an evaluation of its concepts for what they are worth. Academicians may indulge in arguments over what the term *Mathavarini*

in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* means. More relevant would be a quest for ideas tradition can yield to enrich our current forms and techniques.

Shri Panchal concludes his book in the hope that tradition will be studied and absorbed to "create a new vision of contemporary theatre". His long years of effort on this work have certainly made a unique and valuable contribution to the theatre literature of the country.

K.N. PANIKKAR

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The Mahabharata—A Literary Study: Krishna Chaitanya; Clarion Books, Delhi, 1985; 462 pages; Rs 175.

As the saying goes, "What is not there in *Bharata* (i.e. the *Mahabharata*) does not exist in *Bharata* (i.e. India)", so comprehensive and wide-ranging is the great epic. If one does not know the *Mahabharata*, one can neither know the soul of this country nor the distinctive aspects of its culture. It is extremely unfortunate that Indians now generally accept the epic as a religious scripture, when it is basically a literary work of great merit. Perhaps for the first time, someone has tried to analyze the *Mahabharata* in detail from the perspective of literary criticism and for that we all owe the

author our thanks.

For fuller comprehension of Indian culture one has also to have a thorough understanding of the basic concept of *Natya* which aims at transcending theatrical entertainment, soaring to the philosophic plane of such epics as the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and the *Srimad-bhagavata*. The *Natyasastra* says: "There is no such knowledge, no such craft, no such learning, no such art, no such *Yoga*, no such activity, which cannot be seen in *Natya*." The broad sweep of the *Mahabharata* is what *Natya* aims at attaining and therefore perhaps the epic has so profoundly inspired the traditional theatre of India. It is easier to handle in *Natya* materials from the *Ramayana*, since *Bhakti* has an immediate appeal. The *Mahabharata* is far more complex and without taking elements of Indian *Natya*, it is well-nigh impossible to transform the literary content of the epic into any form of performing art, be it theatre or expressional dance. The Indian theatrical genius did in the past accept the challenge of the epic, and many plays based on various episodes of the *Mahabharata* were produced. Some of these plays also found an important place in the repertoire of live theatre traditions like *Kutiyattam* and *Kathakali* of Kerala, *Yakshagana* of Karnataka, *Veethinatakam* of Andhra Pradesh, *Therukoothu* of

Tamil Nadu, Jatra and Chhau of eastern India, Maach and Pandavani—a fascinating form of balladry—of Madhya Pradesh. Contemporary plays like *Andha Yug* have drawn heavily upon the great epic—not to mention Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* recently presented in the course of the Festival of India in France. But contemporary or traditional, a theatrical production based on the *Mahabharata* cannot take off unless the episode enacted is seen from a literary perspective. If, on the other hand, a scriptural perspective is adopted, the production is unlikely to attain the desired seriousness. Theatre workers who want to draw upon the *Mahabharata* should go through the book under review for a literary perspective on the epic, even if at times they have occasion to differ with the author.

Krishna Chaitanya as a scholar is known for his impartial interpretative power. He is not among those who regard all the thought and art of ancient India as sacrosanct. In the preface to the book under review he has strongly reacted against the inclusion of the *Mahabharata* scene where Dussasana tries to disrobe Draupadi, calling it a "grotesquely comic strip-tease". He thinks Vyasa's genius would never have allowed such a scene to intrude on the tragic intensity of the dramatic situation and believes it must have been a

later interpolation. While I agree with the author, I would like to add that the interpolated scene has a purpose—perhaps it illustrates that the divine force becomes active only when the slightest trace of ego is removed from a human heart. This in other words is what Krishna says in the *Geeta*: "Forsaking all dharmas surrender only to me." Krishna, therefore, according to a more elaborate interpolated version, did not supply the unending length of sari till Draupadi, forsaking all the dharmas—of a wife, of a royal personage, of an ethical being—and relying on nobody, not even herself, raised her hands heavenward. From the metaphysical point of view this appears quite interesting, but the dramatic impact no doubt loses its edge with the introduction of the Vastradharan episode.

Krishna Chaitanya seldom overrates or underrates traditional Indian thinking. There are a few books written by Westerners in which it has been suggested that atomic weaponry was known to Indians in the age of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Indians in general may feel highly elated at the suggestion. But Krishna Chaitanya rightly ridicules it in the very first chapter of the book. He says: "It would be utterly absurd to claim that the poet's time knew of atomic weaponry." Immediately after, he adds: "It will be equally absurd to deny that there is a

vivid anticipation that weapons can escalate to astounding megakill capacity." This kind of unbiased analysis of the epic is found throughout the book under review.

In the first chapter of the book, the author analyzes how the "comprehensively conscious artistic intelligence" of Vyasa almost unbelievably anticipated the central predicament of the present day and with what gimletting insight he "laid bare the structural violence that is deeply imbedded in the life of this world".

The second chapter discusses how Vyasa blended folklore with high myth and how his poetic intelligence cleansed the inherited materials for creating a literary work of high merit.

From the third to the eighth chapter, the author with rare insight analyzes the major characters of the *Mahabharata*, and its important episodes. In the following three chapters the content of the *Geeta* is analyzed, indicating how it has a fully dramatic contextual validity. Rightly and convincingly the author points out that the *Geeta* is an inseparable part of the *Mahabharata* and should be seen as such.

The next, that is, the 12th, chapter discusses 'Who is Krishna?' This is a brilliantly written chapter dealing with the subtlest aspect of the *Mahabharata*. Conceiving a character

like Krishna, Vyasa has admirably and very subtly revealed "the interaction of man and deity in incarnate existence". In the long sequence where Krishna identifies himself with several entities, he goes on to say that among the thinkers he is Vyasa. He is then, in a sense, the second self of the poet who conceived him perhaps to point to the possibility that "history can be redeemed only by the partnership of deity and man".

The following two chapters (13th and 14th) discuss Vyasa's concept of this partnership. The divine intention is to raise the human who exercises his autonomy in the most conscientious way, and thereby converges in the same direction as the deity's movement in history, to a "like status" (*Sadharmya*) with himself. The intention cannot be fulfilled if man does not allow the indwelling deity to become his guiding partner in shaping history.

The two concluding chapters discuss the goals (*Purusarthas*) of human life—*Artha* (economic resource), *Kama* (desire), *Dharma* (the binding force that keeps man from slipping into animality and which expresses itself in ethical integrity), and *Moksha* (ultimate liberation)—as seen by Vyasa. There are actually two kinds of *Kama*: one is a "blind drive that is ruinous to the spirit", the other 'leads to the discovery of the highest

function" of dharma. The latter kind is necessary for man's self-realization. The author admirably interprets that Moksha is in fact the bliss of the deity that dwells within man.

The epilogue of the book discusses how the genius of Vyasa could convert philosophy into poetry through transformation of images, so that "poetry becomes philosophy without ceasing to be poetry". Very few man of letters could be credited with this achievement.

The author finally discusses

how the *Mahabharata*, written more than two thousand years ago, reflects the whole of the modern world.

In short, this is an excellent book. Going through it I felt much educated and therefore recommend it to all who wish to know Indian culture and how the great epic mirrors it. Krishna Chaitanya has shown a wonderful path. Hopefully, the path will be followed by many so that yet unseen facets of the great epic come to light.

JIWAN PANI